16/9/95

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SENATOR THE HON GARETH EVANS QC

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600 - 5 SEP 1995

Mr Estanislau da Silva
PO Box 74
BONNYRIGG NSW 2177

Dear Mr da Silva

Thank you for your letter of 15 August concerning East Timor.

Successive Australian Governments have, since 1979, recognised Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor. Australia has never denied, however, that the East Timorese retain the right to self-determination. The Government acknowledges that the exercise of any form of self-determination by the East Timorese will need the cooperation of the Indonesian Government. The Government has therefore encouraged the Indonesian Government to pursue a policy of reconciliation in East Timor, which includes a significant reduction in the military presence, greater respect for East Timor's unique culture, sensitive economic development and a greater degree of autonomy for East Timor.

Self-determination is a fairly loose term and it can mean anything from greater regional autonomy and nationhood as exists, for instance, for the North American Indian nations to full independence. It is not for Australia to prescribe what form self-determination should take in East Timor: that would be for the parties concerned to resolve. Recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor and acknowledgement of the right of the East Timorese to self-determination are not inconsistent. In the colonial period, for instance, the Australian Government recognised Portuguese sovereignty over Portuguese Timor and also the right of the people of the territory to self-determination.

The Australian Government remains concerned about the unsatisfactory situation in East Timor. I have expressed that concern on several occasions this year to Indonesian Foreign Minister Alatas and conveyed to him the Government's view that it was time for a major Indonesian initiative to try to address the underlying causes of discontent in East Timor. I said I believed the military presence in East Timor was excessive and must be reduced; that a strong case existed for a greater degree of autonomy for East Timor; and that a more sensitive development strategy which gave genuine opportunities to the Timorese was necessary.

The Australian Government has long emphasised to the Indonesian Government the need for a process of reconciliation with the people of East Timor. I have urged the Indonesian authorities to sit down with the East Timorese, including the resistance forces, in a forward-looking spirit of cooperation and leaving aside the legacy of anger from the past.

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Australia would like to see Indonesia and Portugal reconcile their differences over East Timor, in the hope that this would assist in improving the situation in East Timor. For this reason we continue to support talks between Indonesia and Portugal under the auspices of the UN Secretary General. The Australian Government was encouraged by the agreement at the January 1995 round of the Indonesia-Portugal dialogue to hold all-inclusive intra-East Timorese talks. We welcomed the holding of the first round of that dialogue last June in Austria and would support the holding of further such meetings. The Australian Government was pleased to be able to provide funding for the travel fund for the June intra-East Timorese talks.

The Australian Government will continue to support steps towards reaching a just and internationally acceptable resolution to the status of East Timor. Australia will support any solution that is agreed to in talks between the parties concerned.

There is obviously a long way to go before we can be satisfied that the human rights situation in Indonesia meets international standards. Until it does, the Government will continue to pursue human rights issues with vigour and in a manner assessed to have the greatest positive impact on the human rights situation in that country.

Yours sincerely

GARETH EVANS